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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to apply and test a model of privacy regulation and disclosure of risky, private information such as sexual abuse. Eight sexually abused children and adolescents, each of whom had initiated disclosure, were interviewed about the disclosure process. A two-part interview was constructed based on the findings in the literature review which identified: (1) boundary conditions based on the person-environment fit; and (2) relational factors that either facilitate or inhibit disclosure. Findings related to boundary conditions suggest that the most conducive environment for disclosure is when the survivor is alone with a peer or trusted friend in a setting outside the home. Findings related to relational factors suggest that the rule in selecting a target person and in weighing risks is embodied within the expectations of friendship. Results indicated that the model was effective in framing an understanding of abuse victims' privacy decisions. However, the factors, while similar to those used by other children and adolescents, reflected different emphases. (One figure is included. Three notes and 70 references are attached.) (MG)

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FACTORS FACILITATING THE DISCLOSURE OF SEXUAL ABUSE BY CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

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FACTORS FACILITATING THE DISCLOSURE OF SEXUAL ABUSE BY CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Abstract

This study was conducted to apply and test a model of privacy regulation and disclosure of risky, private information such as sexual abuse. Eight sexually abused children and adolescents, each of whom had initiated disclosure, were interviewed about the disclosure process. Results indicated that the model was effective in framing an understanding of abuse victims' privacy decisions. However, the factors, while similar to those used by other children and adolescents, reflected different emphases.

Introduction

Sexual abuse of children is a deep-rooted and pervasive problem. Social and individual costs are immense and increase with each passing year (Browne and Finkelhor, 1986). While it is estimated that nine out of ten cases of abuse are not reported, available statistics on reported cases vary indicating from 200,000 to four million cases of child abuse and neglect occurring each year in this country (Garbarino, 1986).

Experts agree that the actual incidence of sexual abuse in childhood often escapes detection because victims choose not to tell. Unlike most social crimes such as theft or murder, which have immediate and public consequences, sexual abuse is often a cryptic crime; a secret known only to the perpetrator and the victim. One poll found that one-third of the adult victims have never revealed their victimage (Kohn, 1987). The balance of power favors the adult, leaving victims trapped in their own silent fears about the real and imagined consequences of telling as well as confused about their own complicity (Browning & Boatman, 1977; Hunter, Kitstrom, & Loda, 1985; Kempe, 1978).

There is a large body of literature surrounding the topic of sexual abuse including sexual behavior (Highlen & Gillis, 1978; Landis, 1956; Peters, 1976), investigation and prosecution (Faller, 1984; Russell, 1983; Tyler & Brassard, 1984), and treatment and counseling (Finkelhor, 1979; Peters, 1976; Wyatt & Peters, 1983) to name a few. Previous research which examined the disclosure of sexual abuse focused on encouraging victims to tell about the specific events of the abuse once the victim is in therapy (Finkelhor, 1979; Peters, 1976; Wyatt & Peters, 1986). No attempts have been made to research why some survivors[1] are able to tell while others remain silent. We know from previous research that abuse has profound negative effects on communication development (Hecht, Foster, Dunn, Williams, Anderson, & Pulbratek, 1986). Unfortunately due to its inherent

secrecy, this silent population of masked sexually abused victims often suffer a lifetime of severe and long standing psychological and social problems (Hunter, et al., 1985).

Intuitively we know that the first step in any treatment process must be the identification of the problem. However, in the area of sexual abuse the burden of identification falls on the survivor and we do not yet understand why some survivors are able to disclose and seek help from elders or peers while others choose a lifetime of silence. This makes the disclosure of abuse an important application of existing models of privacy and disclosure.

The process of self-disclosure is difficult to study because it requires the investigation and explanation of an individual's decision to breach or open a personal boundary to others. Yet this direct investigation of the decision-making process provides a means of studying the interaction between privacy and personal relationships as key conditional elements to self-disclosure (Fisher, 1986; Petronio, 1988a,b). This study investigates the process of decision making about self-disclosure through content analysis of face-to-face interviews with children and adolescent survivors who willingly disclosed sexual abuse to significant others.

Review of Literature

Self-Disclosure

The body of literature on self-disclosure is burdened with inconsistencies in operational and conceptual definitions (Petronio, 1988a,b). At the center of the confusion is the concept of self-disclosure itself (Archer, 1979; Petronio & Martin, 1986) and, as a result, the literature yields many contradictory findings.

Simply defined self-disclosure is saying something about yourself which you consider private and that is not otherwise accessible to other persons (Fisher, 1986; Petronio, 1986). In the past decade, some researchers have indeed taken new approaches by examining self-disclosure in terms of personal privacy, privacy regulation, and decision making. From this perspective disclosure is seen as the voluntary breaching of one's personal boundary, a process with relational implications (Fisher, 1986; Petronio & Martin, 1986). Fisher (1986) conceptualizes the process of decision-making about self-disclosure as a rule-guided activity and presents a framework for examining self-disclosure as episodic behavior embedded within the context of relationships. He employs an ethogenic perspective which entails identifying the rules that guide social behavior, where rules are defined as semi-autonomous social expectations that are contextually involved both in guiding and evaluating one's own and other people's behavior. Ethogeny employs self-report as part of its basic method, assuming that self-disclosure--and the social rules and decision-making processes associated with this behavior--involves conscious choice and that people are capable of accurately reporting their reasons for carrying out these actions (Fisher, 1986; Morris, 1981).

Petronio (1988a,b) proposes a theoretical model for examining the decision-making rules of disclosure based on a synthesis of an economic model of person-environment fit and the theory of privacy regulation. The model proposes two conditions of revealing: 1) a person discloses based on an need or desire to tell private information (internal demand), and 2) a person discloses in response to an environmental solicitation of private information (external demand). The model addresses both reactions from the perspectives of those considering disclosure and the target persons receiving the private information.

The person-environment fit model (French, Rogers, & Cobb, 1974; Petronio, 1982) utilizes an economic demand-supply metaphor, suggesting two types of demands (one created by the person's own need and one imposed by the environment or a person in the environment), and two types of supplies (one given by the person and one given by the environment or a person in the environment). It is the interrelationship between the demands and corresponding supplies that produce a fit between the person and environment.

This fit is regulated by controlling information flow across boundaries between the person and the environment. Privacy regulation theory (Altman, 1975) examines privacy as an interpersonal boundary process between self and others, and focuses on the dynamics of decision making within the self to reveal private information and open the personal boundary to others. Reward and cost factors are created by this decision-making process.

Petronio's model of the Communication Boundary Perspective synthesizes the concept of person-environment fit with the privacy regulation notion to explain disclosure processes. A central premise concerns the "ownership" of private information and the choice involved in keeping or sharing that resource. A resulting hypothesis, then, is that when conditions in the environment fit the desires or needs of an individual, that person is most likely to risk opening their privacy boundary to reveal private and personal information. The revealer and recipient use a boundary control process based on communicative rules to regulate the giving and receiving of private information. The rules, which are understood differently by people of various ages, represent a mechanism that allows or denies privacy. Thus, people consider norms and estimate risk in making the strategic decision to intentionally disclose information about self that is not available from other sources. This disclosure of private

information occurs after an assessment of: 1) predicted outcome, 2) prerequiste conditions (e.g., trust), and 3) threats.

These theories address the process of self-disclosure from a broad perspective and predict the principles guiding the flow of private information between an individual and the environment. The key decision maker, however, is the individual and we must consider what researchers have found to be factors in inhibiting or facilitating self-disclosure. When applied to the sex abuse area, the focus is on those factors which affect boundary regulation and facilitate the disclosure of risky, personal information.

The decision to disclose is dependent upon the contradictory forces of openness and closeness that underlie all relationships (Baxter, 1988; Masheter & Harris, 1986; Rawlins, 1983a, 1983b). As the Petronio model highlights, that decision is made based upon characteristics of the individual, relationship, and situation which provide assessments of risk, social norms, and rewards and costs. The individual may assess not only relational factors, but relational factors in the situation to determine viability of disclosure. Of course, the sophistication of this reasoning process depends on the developmental stage of the person.

The study of relational factors has often been labeled the "dyadic effect" because it considers the effect of the combination of two people. While earlier research (e.g., Jourard, 1971) demonstrates a general "norm of reciprocity" by which disclosure begets disclosure, Miller and Kenny (1986) separate "individual" and "relational" factors in communicative choices.

Individual factors are the characteristics of both people (discloser and target) involved in the exchange which influence the decision-making process. One such factor is the family pattern of the potential discloser. Children are

more likely to disclose to parents who are perceived to be close, warm, friendly, and accepting (Pedersen & Higbee, 1969). In addition, females who perceive their mother as cold, distrustful, and selfish are less likely to disclose to friends, acquaintances, or strangers (Pedersen & Higbee, 1969) and people who perceive their parents as nurturing are more likely to disclose in general (Doster & Strickland, 1969). Nurturance also seems to play a role in target choice. People from highly nurturing families are more likely to disclose to parents than friends, while those from less nurturing families reveal the opposite pattern. One may conclude, therefore, that family patterns are more important in determining the disclosure target than the amount of disclosure (Cozby, 1973). Children and adolescents in abusive relationships with adults (parents or friends of parents) may be less likely to disclose in general, and when they do they may be less likely to disclose to family members than to friends.

The study of other individual factors (gender, ethnicity, and age) have left researchers without a clear picture of who is most likely to disclose. For example, while it had been commonly accepted that women disclose more frequently than men (DeVito, 1983), more recent studies show the reverse under certain situations (Derlega, Winstead, Wong, & Hunter, 1985). Further, it has been suggested that gender differences are situational (Green & Sandos, 1983) and that men and women use different criteria to decide about disclosure (Petronio & Martin, 1986). As the model predicts, individual factors must be considered in concert with relational and situational factors.

The question of disclosure target merges with relational considerations. These factors are summarized by DeVito (1983) who notes that people are most likely to disclose to a person seen as accepting, understanding, warm, and

supportive, and to whom they feel close (e.g., spouses, family, close friends). People are also more likely to disclose to those they like regardless of how relationally close they are and this is particularly true for women (Petronio & Martin, 1986).

Relational factors are centrally tied to the issue of trust. Children and adolescents beyond a certain stage of development define their relationship at least in part according to the level of trust. Friends are seen as those with whom private information can be shared, while others share only more public information (Rawlins & Holl, 1987). Children and adolescents often have difficulty clearly identifying the appropriate boundary conditions, not knowing what is public and private information (Rawlins & Holl, 1987). The consequences of such equivocations are much more pronounced for someone who has been sexually abused, making trust a particularly salient issue.

The act of disclosure can be viewed as a willingness on the part of the discloser to render the self more vulnerable; without some trust in the target person self-disclosure of intimate information is improbable (Jourard, 1971; Rawlins & Holl, 1987; Truax & Carkhuff, 1965). The concept of trust has special meaning for children and adolescents. Developmentally it requires being able to move beyond a concrete and egocentric representation of the world. Relationally, it involves relying on someone else not to relate information that might undermine how an individual defines self-identity and perceives others as perceiving self. Friendship based on trust plays a major role in the development of self-identity (Rawlins & Holl, 1987). If betrayal occurs one may undergo a reappraisal of self and others, and an adjustment of communicative practices. Coleman (1980) considers these to be critical junctures for development with long lasting implications for an individual's self-perception

and communication with others. Rawlins and Holl's (1987) work demonstrates that adolescents distinguish between levels of such betrayals, with "Revealing a Secret" associated with less significant information while "Backstabbing" is characterized by maliciousness and incrimination. The consequences for sexual abuse survivors are even more extreme, with survivors not wanting the disclosure to shape their own identity nor others' impressions of them.

Other normative influences are involved in the assessment of risk factors in disclosure. These include societal bias, fear of punishment, and an inability to cope (Jourard, 1971, DeVito, 1983). Disclosure of risky information can violate established beliefs about self, other, and society, and force an individual to question, reassess, and adjust beliefs. These factors are, of course, especially salient to sexual abuse survivors who must assess how others will perceive their victimization as well as the threat of the perpetrator. Sexual abuse per se may be a normative violation and the survivor may suffer from ostracism and ridicule.

Other researchers have examined the characteristics of the disclosure message. The intimacy and valence (positive/negative) of the message have been found to be salient factors (Gilbert and Whiteneck, 1976; Hecht, Shepherd, and Hall, 1979).

Thus, the review of literature reveals several key factors in the disclosure of sexual abuse: ownership of information, privacy boundaries, relational factors, trust, normative influences, and closeness. The research indicates that the decision to disclose risky, private information is regulated by boundary conditions which include an individual's need to tell or pressures from the environment. This decision is further influenced by relational factors that either facilitate or inhibit disclosure factors. Members of non-nurturant

families such as those found in abusive situations are more likely to disclose to friends than family. Disclosure is also more likely to occur among friends than among other types of relationships in general. In addition, those friends who are perceived as trustworthy, likeable, and close are most likely to receive disclosure. Therefore, we can expect abuse survivors to consider the risk to self identity of disclosing more so than other children and adolescents, to disclose based internal or external needs, and to assess prerequiste conditions including a target who is a trusted, liked, and close friend and a safe environment. The disclosure of sexual abuse provides a test of this approach to privacy.

Methods

Respondents

This research utilized intensive case studies based on open-ended interviews of eight sexually abused children and adolescents. A two-part interview was constructed based on the findings in the literature review which identified: 1) boundary conditions based on the person-environment fit; 2) relational factors that either facilitate or inhibit disclosure.

Questions pertaining to boundary conditions were constructed to address aspects of the environment (i.e., when, where, time of day, etc.) and characteristics of the respondent (i.e., what were you doing, thinking, etc.). Questions pertaining to relational factors were divided into questions about the target person and the relationships which facilitate disclosure (i.e., how would you describe the person, why did you decide to tell her/him, etc.), and into questions exploring perceived risks which inhibit disclosure (i.e., who would you not want to tell).

Approval of the Human Subjects committee was then obtained and consequently the cooperation and assistance of a social worker responsible for the treatment of sexual abuse survivors was enlisted. The social worker identifed the largest possible number of children and adolescents under her care who had voluntarily disclosed to peers, family, or friends first, in contrast to having been identified by someone else. This was the only parameter specified in selecting the sample. Since the emphasis was on identifying the factors which facilitate voluntary self-disclosure, gender, ethnicity, age, or socio-economic status was not considered in selecting this sample. The difficulty obtaining a sample of abuse survivors necessitated this type of nonrandom, convenience sample which cuts across age groups.

A sample was then selected which consisted of two males and six females ranging in ages from 7 to 16 years old. The children were at varying stages of therapy for sexual abuse for a period of time ranging from four months to 7 years. All were under the care of the same social worker at a not-for-profit agency and either experienced one-time offenses or, in one case, a multi-year relationship. Respondents were predominantly from small rural towns with high unemployment rates with one case of an urban family. Approximately half came from economically-determined, working-class families with fifty percent being in-home and fifty percent out-of-home perpetrators. Respondents had voluntarily disclosed to peers (5), adult friends (2), or parents (1) about the abuse. A description of demographic characteristics is included in Figure 1.

Figure 1 about here

The survivor's parents were originally contacted by the social worker with follow-up by the lead author. The nature of this study was discussed with each

parent and subsequent written consent was obtained from each family. Discussions among the social worker, the parents and this researcher took place regarding the best location and setting in which to conduct the interviews. Decisions were made to interview four survivors at the agency and four at their homes. The social worker was present during all interviews to minimize the risks to the respondents. The interviews lasted approximately one and one-half hours and were tape-recorded with the survivor's consent once she/he became comfortable with the tape recorder.

The survivors selected fictitious names (to protect their identity) and were addressed as such during the recorded sessions. Face-to-face interviews were conducted and the interviewer commenced by emphasizing our interest in why they decided to tell someone and not on the actual event. Respondents were informed that there were no right or wrong answers but simply their recollection about what they were doing and thinking just before they told someone; about what they like most/least about the person and what kind of person they would not want to tell and why. The social worker and the respondent compiled a list of the people to whom each survivor disclosed. The survivor then identified the first disclosure and discussed that conversation.

The researcher asked the respondents to describe the conversation in as much detail as possible. The questions elicited information about: 1) <u>boundary conditions</u> (when and where the conversation took place, time of day, and what they were doing or thinking just prior to the conversation); 2) <u>the target person</u> (description of the target person, their relationship, what physical and personal qualities they liked and disliked about the target person); 3) <u>the target person's reaction</u> (how their relationship had changed as a result of that conversation, and the best/worst things that had happened as a result of their

disclosure). The goal of these interviews was to identify the survivors' interpretation of the conversations. Retrospective accounts such as these may not reflect actual conversations. However, they can represent perceptions of conversations and this was the goal of the current application.

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and a systematic interpretive analysis of the transcribed interviews was conducted. The objective was to use this discourse to identify the conceptual structures underpinning the respondents' descriptions of elements affecting boundary regulation and relational factors. Each transcript was read twice while the tape played to ensure accurate transcription, to refamiliarize the lead investigator with each respondent as an individual, and to note special emphases that might affect the interpretations.

Next, a qualitative content analysis was performed for each question across all participants. Each answer was recorded verbatim on a 3x5 card. On three separate occasions, the two researchers and one volunteer independently sorted the respondents' answers to each question into the smallest number of piles needed to describe the data and identify themes. Each theme, by itself, may or may not be significant but provides one aspect of a picture which is built upon with each additional theme or finding to create a total picture.

The pile sorts of each investigator were examined again. Disagreements were discussed and resolved and a final thematic schema agreed upon. For example, one disagreement concerned categorizing whether a respondent was disclosing due to an internal need or in response to pressure from the environment. The respondent reported that she disclosed to a visiting counselor after hearing her address a group about sexual abuse. One investigator considered this the internal, voluntary opening of her privacy boundary based

on the respondent's validation of the target person. The other two considered this a response to pressure from the environment. In this case, the latter interpretation was agreed upon since the respondent was randomly selected from the audience by the unsuspecting counselor and asked to act out the part of an abused survivor. The respondent later wrote the counselor a letter about her real life abuse. This was categorized as responding to pressure from the environment since it was external pressure that triggered the decision.

Analysis

Results

The objective was to use the discourse to identify the conceptual structures underpinning the respondent's descriptions.

Boundary Conditions

In this sample, disclosure typically occurred during the day while with a friend at school away from the home. In section I, QA-1, "When and where did the conversation take place?" received the following breakdown of the eight responses: 2- "during school," 3- "while playing outside," 1- "at my aunt's house"/"at my friend's house," and 1- "at home." The concluding theme here, then, is that most of the disclosures occurred outside the home since only two of the eight disclosures occurred in a home. Six of the respondents disclosed to friends or to a counselor in this setting. In-home disclosures were to a parent and to an aunt. Both of these were authority figures and, unlike most other respondents, these survivors disclosed in order to resolve their situations. One respondent was facing the possibility of being alone with the perpetrator and decided then to disclose to her unsuspecting mother. This respondent recalls:

> We lived in this house, then we moved to a townhouse and at night we are having dinner and Mom started talking about going to my step-dad's house and I said No, because I don't want to. She said, why don't you, and I said I'll talk about it after dinner and we came up to her room and I told her...

This was a conscious act on her part to put a stop to the situation.

In the other in-home disclosure the respondent sought out her aunt when she had the opportunity to be alone with her.

> Well, she was the only person who, Uncle Bob was watching T.V. and everything, and when I came he went into the bathroom and Aunt Shirley was the only one out there. She saw me crying so she took me back into the room and she asked me what happened and I told her.

Here, the respondent used the opportunity of being alone with her aunt to tell her what was happening. However, unlike the previously described respondent, in this situation she was in no threat of being exposed to the perpetrator but rather sought the opportunity to call the attention of her aunt to the situation by talking with her.

In both of these situations the perpetrator lived outside the survivors' homes. The most conducive environment, then, seemed to be those in which the survivor was alone with a peer or person they trusted in a setting outside the home. No matter how trusted the target, the home, in this case the site of fifty percent of the abuse, may not have been viewed as safe. This perception may be due to the presence of the abuser or the relationship between the abuser and the survivor's parent(s) which is reinforced by the home.

Five of the survivors felt an internal need to tell and three were responding to pressure from the environment. Those respondents who initiated disclosure often described feelings of anger and a "need" to tell.

> Well, I don't...a little bit mad at (perpetrator) when I was asking him..Yea, I felt better (after telling) and then it wouldn't stay in me all the time and I wouldn't be afraid. And the second time he did it I was too chicken, I was afraid to tell my Mom and the third time he told me not to tell and so I didn't. And he kept on doing it and I thought, it's time to stop.

> Well the only time when I was in the car and he slapped me and that's when I told ... but then he started threatening me and stuff and that's when I knew it was time to tell.

Of those survivors who responded to the environment one was fleeing from the perpetrator, one disclosed in reciprocity to disclosure from his friend, and one disclosed after being picked out of a crowd to play a role in an abuse scene. In all cases, a specific event triggered the disclosure and in two of the cases the target was "validated" as a recipient of the information; one by disclosure of her own victimage and the other by occupation and expertise. As one victim described it,

> She picked me, and she goes, something like she was molested and didn't know what to do about it. It was just acting out. I thought, it's scary. I thought she knew and I wrote her the letter.

While this sample is too small to make generalizable conclusions, it did appear that within the age range of the respondents whose disclosure motive came from an internal need to disclose (8-16 years old) the eight-year-olds described

a need to tell, "to get it out of me," while the older respondents became introverted and suffered from lowered self-esteem.

> I wanted to tell somebody what had happened... it didn't feel good to keep it inside.

This type of comment is in contrast to the following.

> Yeah, I talk about it a lot. I used to...I wouldn't tell anybody if I was, if there was a problem or something like that. Now I talk to my girlfriend more than I used to. I wouldn't if there was something wrong, we wouldn't talk at all, but now we talk about things...a lot -- yeah!
>
> Yeah, I think of myself a lot more. I think I'm a better person than what I used to be, when my dad was here...

Older respondents, being more fully aware of the consequences of their disclosure vis-a-vis the impact on the family, may chose to keep quiet and even accept part of the blame. Alternatively both age groups may be responding to their therapy.[2] It is unclear, but certainly possible, that the social worker was telling the survivors that it was "bad for them to keep it inside" and that it was "not their fault," as part of the therapy. The younger respondents, then, responded by echoing the therapist and the older respondents by understanding the situation and feeling relieved of their guilt.

Regardless of the boundary conditions which affected disclosure, some of the respondents seemed willing to keep quiet if it had happened only once. In fact, initially several felt abuse would entitle them to some privilege and in two instances the survivors were given candy and money. Others felt it would only happen once and they were hoping to forget it. For example,

> Because I didn't (want to tell)...because I didn't know the first time he did it, he would do it again. And then the second time he did it, I was too chicken, I was afraid to tell my Mom, and the third time he told me not to tell and so I didn't. And he kept on doing it again and I thought it's time to stop because I didn't know he was going to do it again...
>
> I don't know. I don't know. Probably because I thought it wouldn't happen again. I thought he would be nicer to me, but I was wrong.

The models put forth by Petronio and Fisher provide a good conceptual framework in which to examine the dynamics of each subject in her/his individual situation. The unique factor of this population was that all respondents voluntarily breached their boundary of privacy; whether from an internal need or in response to something from the environment. This is in contrast to the choice that many survivors make to remain silent. Overall, most of these survivors responded from an internal need to share and receive a friend's acceptance rather than to get help. This response among the older respondents is consistant with previous research which shows that the greatest need for acceptance and self-evaluation typically occurs during these adolescent years (Rawlins & Holl, 1987).

In summary, the findings related to boundary conditions reflect the following conclusions. The most conducive environment for disclosure was when the survivor was alone with a peer or trusted friend in a setting outside the home, usually during school, play, or other normal daily activity. This situation seems to maximize the person-environment fit. Being away from home

removed the threat of the perpetrator in the case of in-home abuse, the reminder of the perpetrator in the case of out-of-home abuse by someone with a relationship with the parent (as most such cases are), and lessened the chances of being overheard by parent or perpetrator. Thus, the safer environment matched the discloser's overriding need for security.

Five of the eight respondents described an internal "need" to tell. Three responded to demands from the environment. Of those who felt a need to tell, the younger ones (3 eight year-olds) described feelings of anger while the older ones (thirteen and sixteen) described themselves as introverts and expressed low self-esteem. The younger ones seemed to be expressing their feelings without filtering. The older ones may have responded to normative pressures by accepting some guilt and acknowledging the social and family consequences of telling.

Also, in four instances, the respondents indicated that they did not tell right away because they did not think it would happen again; they would be entitled to special treatment; or they were being given candy and money. This was, in essence, a confusing situation where on the one hand something was secretive and unusual about the behavior of the perpetrator but the survivor was being rewarded. Thus, the survivor either did not want to try to understand it or felt that it would entitle them to rewards. Either way, they delayed revealing the private information.

Relational Factors

The rule or norm in selecting a target person and in weighing risks was embodied within the expectations of a friendship. That is, targets were people who were best friends, could be trusted, and/or would understand.

At the time we were best friends..Someone that would care. Someone who wouldn't tell everyone.

Well, I was...the very first person I told was my friend Terri. I thought because I could trust her, she's my best friend, I saw no reason why I couldn't...I could trust her...Yeah, and friendship, I guess.

If I ever tell (my friend) something he doesn't say nothing to nobody, unless I ask him to...he's a good friend...I can trust him. Not normally there's boys I can trust. At that time we were better friends than any of my girlfriends.

In all cases, the respondents described the target person as having the following qualities: "my best friend," "someone who cares," "someone I can trust," "someone who would not make fun of me." Only two respondents considered the target persons someone who could help them. Getting help, except when there is an overwhelming physical threat, is not as compelling as being able to discuss it, share it, get a friend's opinion, and receive confirmation that they were still liked. Two of the respondents remarked:

(I felt) happier after telling him...maybe he likes me a little better..maybe a little better.

Well, the best thing is I knew somebody can trust me. When I woke my dad he didn't get mad at me, because he knew I was doing the right thing...

All of the respondents expressed great fear of telling someone who would tell others. The greatest risk--next to physical encounter--was betrayal. One

respondent elaborated a lengthy and emotional recounting of how one friend she trusted told other children and the ensuing mockery and fights she had to endure as a result of being stigmatized.

> Yeah, I told one friend, but I thought she was going to keep it a secret, but no, she had to go and blab to other people. She's been a real nice friend in school until I told her and then she didn't believe me so went and told Julio and then these boys in there knew and they went '(name deleted) got molested' because I told her I got molested. And I had said don't tell any other people cuz I really trust you. But then she came out and went and told the boys. I've been getting into fights with the boys and they hit me and pick on me.

Others emphatically responded to "who would you not want to tell?"

> A stranger, because if I told a stranger they'd say sure and probably do it to me too. The person I really wouldn't want to tell is the boys because they'd really pick on me and they'd start punching me.
>
> Someone I didn't know!
>
> Someone I wouldn't trust, who would tell.
>
> Someone that would go tell everybody else.
>
> Someone who would tell, who didn't care...

The fear of having someone tell would clearly make the survivor vulnerable to mockery and ridicule. This fear of losing peers' respect and social status among friends is consistent with the literature on adolescent friendship management and seems to be a major factor in inhibiting disclosure. These respondents were fortunate to have had loyal friends. However, those survivors

who tend to be introverted or lack friends and social skills would be unlikely to disclose to peers. The older the survivor gets, the more introverted and even less likely she/he is to voluntarily disclose about sexual abuse.

In summary, then, the rule in selecting a target person and in weighing risks was embodied within the expectations of friendship. All the respondents indicated the same criteria in selecting a target person: someone who was a best friend, who cared, who could be trusted (not to tell). The reward in disclosure, then, was sharing a situation they did not understand and receiving approval that they were still liked by their friends, and not being betrayed. In this they differed from the adolescents in the Rawlins and Holl (1987) study who expected friendship as the reward supplied by the target and environment.

None of the respondents mentioned concern about disrupting the family or hurting the perpetrator. Perhaps this consideration of the self first enabled them to decide to disclose. Indeed, disclosure can be viewed as an "enpowering" act which asserts ownership of the information and takes control of one's body and life.

The three respondents who reacted to triggers from the environment also described the target person as someone who could help. Thus, it may be that those who had not been internally triggered to tell eventually found the incentive through a target person who was caring, trustworthy and a friend but could also help them resolve their dilemma. All the respondents expressed great fear of being socially ostracized by having someone they trusted betray their confidence.

Conclusions

The findings of this study provide support for the models of privacy regulation reviewed earlier and reveal the factors influencing disclosure of

sexual abuse. Disclosures were found to represent both types of demands (internal and external). However, this sample was drawn from respondents who voluntarily disclosed in response to internal and external demands. Another, more direct type of external demand is exemplified when sexual abuse is initially discovered by a third party and the respondent is confronted with the situation by an adult (e.g., parents, police, social worker). These latter situations of external demand must also be studied.

However, a limited understanding of internal and external demands is provided by the current data. Here, external demands were of two types: the exigencies of the situation and an environment structured to elicit disclosure. When faced with an impending incident, some survivors will disclose. Others can be encouraged to disclose by structuring a situation and validating the target. In one instance, upon completing a public presentation on the topic the counselor required the audience to write her a "secret" note. The note, which could be about any topic, provided a safe vehicle for disclosure. The counselor had "validated" herself as a recipient through a caring and accepting attitude and the promise of absolute secrecy.[3]

Internal demands were more frequent in this study and conform, in most ways, to the findings of disclosure in general. Friendship, trust, risk, social norms, acceptance, and caring recipients are all salient factors. With abuse victims, however, these factors are distorted by the potential consequences of disclosure. While Rawlins and Holl (1987) note that trust was frequently used to define friendship among the general population, the opposite consideration is primary for the current population. Friendships are used to judge trust, with the emphasis on the latter rather than the former. Similarly, Rosenfeld and Kendrick (1984) found that college students disclose in order to build a

relationship and clarify self-concept. These abuse survivors do not disclose unless the friendship is established and use that friendship to eliminate the negative consequence of disclosure. While previous disclosures may be used to establish trust and build friendship, private information about abuse is not revealed until the relationship and trust are firmly established. Because the costs of betrayal are more extreme, Rawlins and Holl's category of "Revealing a Secret" does not exist; all unauthorized disclosures are "Backstabbing." The risk factor is considered so high that trust is placed before all else, and friendship used as one of the factors for determining trust. Liking, while important, is less salient than the absolute confidence of secrecy. The respondents vividly describe the threats to self-identity and self that go far beyond the "metaphorical violence" described in Rawlins and Holl (1987). Any ambivalence in identifying public and private boundaries is removed by the urgency of the situation. The contradictory demands of popularity and disclosure to close friends that exist among the general population have been resolved for abuse survivors. They choose privacy unless absolutely assured through trust. This emphasis is further demonstrated through the choice of target based on confidentiality rather than the potential for help except when threat was imminent.

A final consideration is the actual physical environment. It is not surprising that most of these survivors chose to disclose outside the home. Since parents and friends of parents were the perpetrators, the home is a threatening environment because it provides a reminder of the act(s) and is not secure in terms of privacy. Other settings provide a better person-environment fit.

In sum, then, this paper demonstrates the utility of the privacy model of disclosure (Petronio, 1988a,b) and details some of the differences between disclosure of sexual abuse and other types of information. While many of the factors are common to privacy regulation and disclosure in the general population, among abuse survivors a different formula is used for weight the relative contributions and making decisions about boundary conditions. Hopefully through studies such as these we can begin to build models which facilitate disclosure of abuse while learning more about the processes by which risky, private information is shared.

Notes

[1]The word survivor is used to denote people at various stages of recovery from abuse and avoid the negative connotations of the term victim.

[2]Some of the responses, particularly toward the end of the interviews, seemed to be the conditioned responses resulting from the therapy they were undergoing. For example, when asked why she decided to tell, one child responded,

> I was thinking about when I tell her he would go to court and we would go to court and he would get in jail for this...How come he only gets to go to jail for five years for this?

This eight year old was not likely to have known about going to court and a jail term prior to the therapy. Another response that came up various times when asked why they decided to tell was that it was not "good" or "nice" to keep it inside.

> Because I wanted to tell somebody what had happened..it didn't feel good to keep it inside.

> Because it's not nice to hold it inside..you should tell right away.

It is difficult to judge the extent to which the therapy the victims had undergone altered their responses. The nature of these questions were quite different since they did not seek the sort of information the therapist did, such as information about the actual event. It seems clear, however, that the victims'responses were affected and this should be taken into consideration in doing future research. Unfortunately, due to legal and ethical entanglements, it is virtually impossible to access victims prior to the onset of the therapy process. Researchers must familiarize themselves with the therapy being received and attempt to control for this in the analyses.

[3]The second author has also personally experienced this validation process. When strangers discover that he is a communication professor they often ask what areas he studies. While becoming involved in this line of research he would often list abuse and was surprised at the number of strangers who, shortly thereafter, disclosed physical or sexual abuse in their own lives.

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Respondent	Gender	Age at Interview	In-Home Out-of-Home Perpertrator	Time in Therapy	Target Person	Internal/ External Trigger
1	F	8	IH - Stepdad	8 months	Mom	I
2	F	8	IH - Dad	4 months	Adult-Friend	E
3	M	7	OH - Older Friend	4 months	Peer-Friend	E
4	M	8	OH - Older Friend	4 months	Peer-Friend	I
5	F	16	IH - Dad	7 years	Peer-Friend	I
6	F	13	IH - Dad	7 years	Counselor	E
7	F	13	OH - Mom's Friend	12 months	Peer-Friend	I
8	F	8	OH - Family Friend	4 months	Peer-Friend	I

Figure 1. Characteristics of Respondents.